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Festa!

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a cura di Anna Ghiraldini, Chiara Velicogna
e Christian Toson

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Cum festinatione*

Celebrating Salome's dance again

Barbara Baert

Perché nulla dura, accanto a lei, tutto galleggia, scompare e ricompare come schiuma [...]
Belinda non è un insetto, Mète, sebbene le somigli
Non lasciarti investire dal vento che si sprigiona attorno a lei
in ogni direzione, e non fa durare nulla [...]
Non adorarla, Mète, non desiderarla
(Sandro Veronesi, *Gli Sfiorati*, Milano 1990, 210-212)

Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12 recount Herod's feats and the death of John the Baptist. Herod had the prophet imprisoned for denouncing as incestuous his marriage to Herodias, the former wife of his brother. During a festive banquet, Herodias' daughter dances before Herod, who is so enchanted that he promises her a favour. At her mother's behest, she asks for the head of John the Baptist. The king honours her request and has the head delivered to her on a plate (*in disco*), which she gives to her mother. When John's disciples discover his death, they bury his headless body.

In Mark's plot the motif of dance and by extension of Salome demonstrate a peculiar spatial energy: the way in which Salome is placed in different rooms is confusing and seems flighty. It starts with verse 22, where the daughter *comes in* (*cumque introisset filia ipsius*). Then, in verse 24, when she has finished her dance and Herod's oath has inescapably been made, she leaves the room and asks her mother for advice. Her mother then whispers the fatal demand into her ear (*quae cum exisset dixit matri*). In verse 25, the pace of the story picks up. Salome *re-enters the room* and *immediately* addresses the king with *haste* (*cumque introisset statim cum festinatione*). At this point, the events are interrupted by the beheading in the prison after which, in verse 28, the executioner gives the head to the girl, and the girl gives the head to the mother (*et adtulit caput eius in disco et dedit illud puellae et puella dedit matri suae*). The first transfer of the head, according to the context, happens in the hall where the party is held, while the second is suggested to have happened in a different room, since earlier, she had to leave to go see her mother. In short, she comes in, she leaves, she hastily goes in again, she receives the platter, she gives the platter to the mother.

The French literary critic René Girard (1923-2015) wrote a fascinating essay on the role of the dancing girl in Mark's plot. The author develops the motif from the concept of "mimetic desire". "Salome is a child. She has nothing to do with the dance of the seven veils and other *orientalia*," writes Girard (Girard 1984, 311-324). The child imitates her mother's wish and from the moment she is filled with this wish, the girl crosses a certain threshold. It is said in

Mark that the girl *hastens* back (*Cum festinatione*), and *immediately* demands John's head *in disco*. The acceleration reflects the intensification of the plot that will converge in what Girard calls "mimetic violence". Girard writes: "At first she is a blank sheet of desire, then, in one instant, she shifts to the height of mimetic violence (Girard 1984, 314)". This peculiar rite of passage enacts itself in an inevitable determination of moments: from the silent dance, to the king's giving voice to the oath, to the mother's wish fulfilled, culminating in the dazzling horror of a head on a platter offered during a banquet. In this essay I revisit the iconographic motif of the dancing girl from an interdisciplinary perspective involving exegesis, space, ritual performance and *Pathosformeln*.

'A horrific couple'

In *Your Face Tomorrow* (*Tu rostro mañana*), the Spanish novelist Javier Marías (1955-2022) writes about a universal mental condition by which mankind conflates different events in time, spontaneously associates fiction and non-fiction, thought and speech, superimposes motifs as a partly unconscious technique in narration, yes, even as a survival strategy to understand the unknown, the subtext, the undepictable, the taboo. He writes in 'The horrific couple': "It isn't just a matter of superimposing their two faces, so different, so opposed – that would be a visual aberration, an ocular absurdity. No, it's an association, a recognition, an affinity grasped" (Marías 2006). 'The horrific couple' described by the Spanish novelist is just what provided a locus of suffering and genius in the work of Aby Warburg. This polarisation is also a part of his term *Pathosformel*, which he applied to the generations of artists of the Italian Quattrocento.

Pathosformel ist eines Affekts oder einer Leidenschaft mit seinem Ursprung in der griechischen Antike, zugleich Darstellung und Bändigung eines inneren Aufruhrs, der in verschiedensten Zeiten und Regionen immer wieder von neuem gebraucht wird. Dabei kann es zu einer 'inversionen', einer Radikalumkehr des Sinns, kommen (Königseder 1995, 74).

Pathosformel is the shape in which the energy of the past is locked away. The disturbance of these shapes relates to *Engrammen*: cores enclosed in images that constantly recur. The art historian is able to recognise these cores, pursue them, and in Aby Warburg's case, classify them by words (tables, like in linguistics) and groups of images (his famous *Bilderatlas*). The 'dancing girl' is both an innocent and a *Köpffägerin* (*Tafel* 46 of the *Bilderatlas*) (Warnke, Brink 2008; Warburg 1992, 156-173; Koos et al. 1994). *Ebenso wird der Typus "Köpffägerin" der Bibel, Judith und Salome, im Photo einer Golfspielerin, die mit dem Schläger ausholt, harmlos paraphrasiert* (Königseder 1995, 74). Aby Warburg's *Ikonologie des Zwischenraums* can thus be found in a methodological interspace, but also concerns the remarkable 'interspaces' created by artists of the late Middle Ages and Early Humanism, between the generations of the first Humanist wave (including Masaccio, 1401-1428) and the second Humanist wave (including Ghirlandaio, 1449-1494). The fifteenth-century artist, aware of perspective, anatomy, and optics, will see it as a special artistic challenge to integrate Salome's dance as both a spatial and temporal motif. This is where Salome finds herself becoming 'ambivalent', like a *Dynamogramm*, and where she binds innocence and perversity together into the mystifying

interbeing that would later take on excessive proportions deep inside the 19th-century femme fatale phantasm (Apostolos-Cappadona 2001, 95-108). I will discuss these different levels of the 'interspace' with the help of the cycle by Masolino da Panicale (1383-1440) in Castiglione Olona (1435) and the cycle by Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) in Prato (1452-1464).

The cycle in Castiglione Olona can be found in the private baptistery of Cardinal Branda da Castiglione (1350-1443). Masolino was confronted with a relatively small Gothic chapel, in which he painted all of the wall surfaces, including the vaults, with scenes from the life of John the Baptist [Fig. 1] (Bertelli 1987, 25-47; Bertelli 1997, 243-255). The scenes connected to his death are on the right-hand side of the chapel. The decapitation of John is depicted in the innermost window, which architecturally strengthens the semantic meaning of the window as 'coupure', as *opportunitas* and *Wendepunkt*, even as 'defenestration' (Webster's 1828 Dictionary). However it is not yet fait accompli, the head is not yet disconnected from the body, and in that sense, the iconography is atypical. This is also the case with the scenes on the wall next to it. These have been conceived in two parts: the buffet on the left, and a platform with a sitting Herodias on the right. In the middle, far away, there is a scene that can only barely be made out: the burying of the decapitated body of the prophet, as described in the final verses of Mark's chapter.



1 | St. John cycle, 1435, Masolino da Panicale (1383-1440), fresco. Castiglione Olona Baptistery of the Collegiata.

Masolino uses the open space, the contrast between frontal view and depth, minimizing the body language while emphasizing an atmospheric silence. The most peculiar and even unique aspect of this iconographic representation is that Masolino left out the motif of the dance. The *Filia saltasset* from verse 22 is suppressed in favour of Salome looking empty, neutral and humble in front of the platform. Only those who know the source material know that she is either 'undergoing' Herod's oath or 'formulating' her terrible demand. In both cases, she has just finished dancing, but we do not see that. Salome is neither moving hastily or flightily. She is not still hot from an all-consuming dance. There is nothing of the sort in Masolino's *ars nova*. The emptiness replaces the drama of the dance. Herodias, the mother, testifies to a similar alienation. She is located outside of where the banquet is held, in a gallery. She has waited patiently. There is not a single trace of excitement to be seen. There is only the daughter who is serenely offering her the head. Only the two horrified girls behind her in the gallery form the mirror to show the real perversity that is taking place: they are a contrast to the stillness. They recoil, seem to scream, their faces a grimace of true revulsion. 'The horrific couple' has an impact on them. The transposition of the supposed speed and immediacy of events in the text is transferred to the witnesses of the event, who absorb and project the suppressed trauma. Salome and Herodias, however, have emptied their gaze and their fear is now also our fear. There is, as it were, a mimetic transposition (*supra* Girard's 'mimetic violence') between the viewers internal to the iconography and the external real-life viewer. One could say that the true perversity of Masolino's scene is the inertia of the mother and daughter, yes, the suppres-



2 | Story of the death of John the Baptist, , Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), fresco. Walls of the Cappella Maggiore (1452-1464). Prato, Duomo.

sion of the most essential *motif*: the dance. The scene is desperately trying to find meaning in the silence of a senseless death, in the *Pathosformel* of a *pathia* or inversive energy. By extension, this takes us a long way from a room full of *animo* and festivities. Hermeneutically we are redirected towards the empty space of the gallery. The 'speeding up' and hasty transmission of the head has been articulated in the rhythm of the arcades and the acceleration along the convergent lines. Masolino's interpretation shows a mysterious *Verwandlung* of the narrative motif of rushing, dancing in the technical capacities of perspective and its accelerative vanishing point.

The feast is in the corner

The *Pathosformel* in the cycle by Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) in Prato, only one generation later, is completely different [Fig. 2]. Salome appears three times in the space, a festive banquet with lots of guests. The guests gesticulate, there are spectators and musicians; and all of them are gathered around a U-shaped table, the opening of which is directed towards the viewer. The tiled floor accentuates the lines that vanish at the back of a double gallery into the Tuscan landscape. From a narrative point of view, Filippo Lippi stays most true to the mobility and dynamics as they were explained in the gospel. While Salome is performing her nymphic dance near the centre of the painting, close to the party table, we also see her on the far left receiving the head of John the Baptist, only to present it to her mother Herodias at the table on the far right.

Filippo Lippi featured a Salome worthy of the *Ninfa fiorentina* that Aby Warburg studied. The prototype is the *Ninfa* as seen in the Ghirlandaio cycle (1485-1490) in the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, in the scene depicting the birth of John the Baptist. The *Ninfa fiorentina* features an archaicized, dancing girlish figure, whose counterpart can be seen in Prato as the gracefully dancing Salome. Her excessively pleated and almost diaphanous layered robes form an *ekphrasis* for ancient bacchanalias. The viewer senses that this dancing nymph, this Salome, oscillates ambivalently between innocence and ancient orgiastic imagery: her *Pathosformel* has renewed itself from the inside out. Salome has become 'the horrific couple', superimposed, confronting, with the way her face is directed towards the viewer, staring out at us while she hands over the head. And the disgusted pair behind the mother again reflects and elucidates how the viewer is confronted with 'mimetic violence'. Filippo Lippi also added another exceptional motif that shows his intelligent artistic use of the space and the architecture. He places Salome receiving the head in the utmost left corner of the image, with the executioner's arm cut off exactly at the elbow by the actual corner of the chapel. Bertrand Rougé and Louis Marin (1931-1992) have each published a fascinating essay on this detail (Rougé 2008, 147-171; Marin [1989] 2006, 165-190; Baert 2015, 211-233). According to Marin the 'cornerstone-arm' articulates the beheading itself: *l'angle du mur coupe le bras du bourreau comme coupeur de tête et coupure de cadre* (Marin [1989] 2006, 166-167). Of the same remarkable 'staging as cutting' Bertrand Rougé writes:

L'angle du mur marque donc l'articulation narrative, tout en masquant le temps écoulé, l'instant ellipsé: il sert à marquer à la fois la jonction et la disjonction constitutives du récit - l'une masquant l'autre par une espèce de syncope (footnote 13 : B. Rougé 2008, 156-157). Le cou coupé fait face en tant qu'il est trace de l'instant où la voix a cessé, trace de l'interruption ou de l'extinction de la voix. Le tableau présente le moment où la voix fut éteinte sur le point d'être proférée. Et c'est parce que l'instant ainsi saisi sous la forme d'un cou coupé est celui de l'interruption (où il n'est nul besoin que la voix s'entende réellement) interruption qui, en outre, marque la rupture entre l'espace du spectateur et celui de la représentation (Rougé 2008, 163-164).

A cursory exploratory investigation has shown that this paradigm is articulated not only in the Prato cycle (although in my view this cycle gives it its most ingenious form), but that at least two other cycles work the idea of the corner(stone) into the theme's iconographic organization. Here we may have fallen upon the traces of the paradigm junction/disjunction as catalyst for the iconography of death, the dance and the banquet in the story of John the Baptist (Long 2013, 1153-1205).

In the cycle of murals depicting the death of John the Baptist in the homonymous chapel in the church of St Martial in Avignon, Matteo Giovannetti between 1346 and 1348 painted the head on the platter precisely levelled with the (painted) corner of the banqueting hall (Castelnuovo 1991). Unusually, here it is not Salome herself but the executioner who, under the daughter's watchful eye, hands the platter to Herod and Herodias). The platter is still in the progressive tense: the head already lies on the platter, but it has not yet reached the table or the onlook-

ers. The executioner is handing over the head; the platter has not yet been 'received'. The platter is 'suspended' in the in-between. Its transit is marked by the spatial line of the corner. The head crosses this cut and so gives significance to a 'not-yet-quite'. John's head mediates in a temporal and spatial symbolism, the indicator of which is the actual line of the corner. In the frescoes of St John the Baptist chapel in the convent of Santa Giulia in Brescia the scene of the banquet was so conceived by the anonymous fourteenth century Lombard painter that the head was again placed at the level of a (painted) corner of the room; the corner at the same time divides the visual space into two parts (Breda 2001). This time the platter has (just) been deposited, again by a man (the executioner?) rather than by Salome, who watches him as a silent witness of the horror in which she has played an unwilling part. In this scene the head is the intersection in the completion of the horror, again referring to both connection and transition. The one cut/split (throat, horizontal) forms a replacement of the other cut/split (space, vertical). The overlap articulates how spatiality and temporality must be joined together to become *le fait accompli*. The head incorporates the borderline; it requisitions it as a *pars pro toto*. The semantic cluster corner/head/executioner/arm may find its explanation in the action of the executioner: cut, section, intersection.

In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) writes the following about the corner: "Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house. The corner becomes a negation of the Universe" (Bachelard 2014, 155). "It is a curve as shelter" (Bachelard 2014, 156). "Why is it worse for us to say that an angle is cold and a curve warm? That the curve welcomes us and the over sharp angle rejects us? That the angle is masculine and the curve feminine? A modicum of quality changes everything. The grace of a curve is an invitation to remain. We cannot break away from it without hoping to return. For the beloved curve has nest-like powers; it incites us to possession, it is a curved 'corner', inhabited geometry. Here we have attained a minimum of refuge, in the highly simplified pattern of a daydream of repose. But only the dreamer who curls up in contemplation of loops understands these simple joys of delineated repose" (Bachelard 2014, 166). The corner has anciently been a focus of magical and 'implosive' forces, precisely because it is the joining of two sides. This intersection is both connection and separation, comparable to the magic of the knot (Zischka 1977; Ingold 2015, 81-100). This ambiguity charges the corners of the house, of the field with magical energies:

Die Eck ist als äußerste Grenze des Ackers oder Hauses, als Schlupfwinkel von Dämonen, ein gefährdeter und für Zauber geeigneter Ort. Die vier Ecken bedeuten z.B. bei der Besitzergreifung das ganze Gebiet (Weiser 1929, 544-550).

In folk beliefs, household spirits, demons and energies inhabit the corners. This is where sacrifices should be buried and this is where the broom should sweep the most. This 'nervousness' of the corners of the room finds expression in popular sayings: to turn the corner (to pass a critical point in a process); to be set in a corner (punishment); or in Dutch to come out of the corner (to appear), to go around the corner (to die) and even a 'dead corner' (a blind spot).

Because the corner forms the borderline of the space and at the same time comprises an end and a beginning, in short a hinge within the house, it is also the place of Janus, the god of the beginning of the new and of the end of the old. It is accepted that the figure of John the Baptist is reminiscent of this Roman deity (Guénon 2004, 241; Gauthier 2012, 95). The former mediates on the threshold, at the intersection of Old and New. Furthermore, John/Janus substitutes the cosmic turn of renewal celebrated on the summer solstice of 24 June (Gaignebet 1986, 351-356). The solstice goes through the cosmic 'throat' which requires mediation by silence: the *angoisse* (Gaignebet 1986, 363). This silence is the pause, the interval, a very short cosmic standstill (Macho 1993, 104-116). The solstice is the 'gorgonian' silence, intangibly terrifying but absolutely necessary in order to allow the greatest and most dangerous mysteries: to clear the way for the sun.

In biblical Christianity, the tradition of corners and keystones goes back to the Old Testament and illustrates how Semitic monotheism channelled its lithic phantasm into the stone of stones: that of the Temple or the foundation of Zion. Isaiah 28:16 says: "Therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: 'One who trusts will not panic'". Matthew 21:42 reacts to these passus with: "Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?'" For a long time it was presumed that the *lapis angularis* was a symbol exclusively for Christ (Ladner 1942, 43-60; Baert 2012), until Arndt and Kroos showed that twelfth-century encyclopaedic works expanded the cornerstone metaphor to include John the Baptist. As mediator he was therefore long regarded through a semiotic of linking and hinging, given his role as mediator between Old and New Covenant. We might quote Sicard of Cremona (ca. 1155-1215): *Joannes fuit lapis angularis inter Vetus et Novum testamentum* (Mitrale 416, PL 213). While Gulielmus Durandus (ca. 1237-1296) says, *Fuit enim ioannes quasi lapis angularis id est vetus et novum testamentum coniungens* (*Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*; Arndt, Kroos 1969, 243-328). The *prodomos* is the keystone between old and new, and therefore often to be found exactly in those tectonics in the churches. This demonstrates the degree to which the *Precursor* was considered nearly equal to Christ. As cornerstone he acquires a specific function: the junction between the old and the new covenant indeed.

Die Liebe Gottes steckt im Detail

Let me by way of conclusion revisit a remarkable detail in the beautiful dancing Salome of San Marco. Her dish is subtly hemmed with red stones [Fig. 3]. The red alludes to the blood and thus also to the dish's function. Examples from painting and sculpture can also be found in which red pigment evokes the actual blood on the dish. In San Marco the red stones likewise suggest blood and the poesis between these glittering jewels and dried blood can be seen in a technically perfect whole characteristic of virtuoso mosaic building. Furthermore, the red lines extend as far as Salome's crown. The extension results from the artistic choice to use red in both dish and crown: the contour carries through. At a closer look the red mosaic line seems unbroken, flowing into a single line: crown draws dish, dish draws crown. Crown and dish desig-



3 | Detail of Salome's crown (between 1343-1345), Paolo Veneziano (ca 1300-ca 1365), mosaic. Venezia, San Marco.

nate each other; they turn into one another. The ultimate contamination – ‘the horrific couple’ – is activated by grace of the medium itself. The essential motif of the plot – *filia saltasset* – resonates in the mutual contamination of crown and dish, the crucial motif seeks to surpass itself in the artistic interflow of *choros* and *graphos*. The story's ‘dance’ and the mosaic's ‘line’ are now united in an exceptional ekphrasis: the mosaic as pictorial choreography. And there is more. The red sequence of stones touches the fingertips of the *Kopfjägerin*, as they once left from the artist's fingertips. Although the detail can barely be seen with the naked eye, the detail simply exists. It is there. Resonating a Higher Eye. *Die Liebe Gottes steckt im Detail*.

Elle m'émouvait.
 Elle me ramenait très loin en arrière.
 Avant. Avant que tout commence.
 Avant la vie.
 Paul in the movie *Avant L'Hiver* (Philippe Claudel, 2013).

Notes

This essay is an revised extract from *When the daughter came in and danced. Revisiting Salome's Dance in Medieval and Early Modern Iconology*, in *Antwerp Royal Museum Annual, 2013-2014* (appeared in 2016), 152-192; and *Revisiting Salome's Dance in Medieval and Early Modern Iconology*, "Studies in Iconology" 7, Leuven-Walpole-Paris-Bristol 2016.

Evangelium Secundum Marcum – Chapter 6. The Gospel According to Mark Vulgate.Org, 2005-2012. Webster's 1828 Dictionary. The etymology of window is interesting here. In Latin it means fenestella: the sacred opening for luck and opportunity. And moving from 'porta' and 'portus' to the Greek 'poros' (πόρος, opening as signifying) we see its contrary in a-poria. *Opportunitas* is therefore a *dare locum*: a making place for something; offering space to the potential that is necessary for revolution, the Wendepunkt. In English the word fenester was used as a parallel until the mid-18th century and fenestration is still used to describe the arrangement of windows within a façade. Also, words such as 'defenestration' are in use, meaning to throw something out of a window.

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English abstract

The text analyses the biblical story of the death of John the Baptist as recounted in Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12, with a particular focus on the role of Salome and her dance. Salome is the daughter of Herodias, who had been denounced by John for her incestuous marriage to her brother-in-law Herod. During a festive banquet, Salome dances for Herod and he promises her anything she wants. At her mother's urging, she requests the head of John the Baptist, which Herod delivers on a platter. The author explores the motif of dance in Mark's account of the story, and how Salome's movements are indicative of her transition from a child with no agency to a participant in "mimetic violence" as she imitates her mother's desire for revenge. The author also connects this biblical story to the concept of Pathosformeln, as described by art historian Aby Warburg, and explores the recurring image of the "dancing girl" as both an innocent figure and a "Kopfjägerin", or head-hunter*

*The English abstract above was written by ChatGPT and strictly unedited by the editors of this issue (> Editoriale). This sentence itself was automatically translated with DeepL.

keywords | Herod; John the Baptist; Salome; Mimetic desire; Pathosformeln.



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200 • Festa! I

a cura di Anna Ghiraldini, Christian Toson e Chiara Velicogna

numero speciale con contributi di Architettura, Archeologia, Letterature, Estetica e arti visive, Antropologia e storia della cultura, Digital Humanities, Teatro, di:

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e, nella sezione “Che festa sarebbe senza di voi?”: Sergio Bertelli, Giuseppe Cengiarotti, Paolo Morachiello, Sergio Polano, Lionello Puppi, Mario Torelli, Martin Warnke